

Newsletter

Committee meeting 4 May 2020



Dear Reader,

The Covid-19 pandemic and the public health measures taken to fight it have brought unprecedented challenges for the sectors that we in the Committee on Culture and Education are committed to defending. Schools and universities have closed across the world, giving rise to remarkable innovation in online learning and teaching methods and yet exposing gaps and disparities and exacerbating existing inequalities. The public health measures have been a particular challenge and worry for the thousands of people on mobility exchanges through the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. Indeed, the crisis is having a profound impact on young people,

whose education and employment prospects have changed overnight.

The cultural and creative sector has made theatre plays, exhibitions, films and so on available online to the wider public for free, thus underlining again how central culture is to our social fabric. And yet this cannot mask the catastrophic impact the crisis is having on the sector, with theatres and cinemas closed, concerts and book fairs cancelled and television and film production on hold. We are acutely aware that this poses an existential threat to the often small businesses and individual artists that make up the sector.

The media has demonstrated once again in this crisis how much we need independent, free coverage of events, critical appraisal of the actions of governments and the free flow of robustly researched, factual information. As the virus itself has spread, so has disinformation and fake news and a free, vibrant media sector is society's antidote to that. And yet again, a sector that has proved so pivotal is facing an existential threat as advertising revenue plummets. Last but not least, we have all seen how crucial sport is to all our lives, whether it be playing tennis with friends in our local sports club, staying fit and healthy or cheering on our football team every weekend. And again, with sports events cancelled at all levels, many clubs and organisations face bankruptcy and many coaches, trainers and club staff risk losing their livelihoods.

In the Committee on Culture and Education, we have been monitoring developments across the sectors for which we are responsible and which have been so badly affected by the turmoil of the past two months. Even though we have not been able to gather physically for committee meetings, we have worked closely together to push for short-term support to the sectors and to look ahead to the medium-term recovery and to learning the policy lessons from the crisis. Our message to the education, culture, youth, media and sports sectors is that we are with you.

I am pleased to say that, on 4 May, we were able to meet properly as a committee for the first time since the confinement measures came in. We have also had to adapt our working methods and things are very different. Nevertheless, even when we cannot meet in person, we remain committed to holding the Commission to account and to pushing for change where it's needed. Committee business – while virtual in format – will now return to a more regular pattern of meetings and we look forward to pushing forward with the pressing legislative and policy agenda.

Sabine Verheyen
Chair, Committee on Culture and Education

Structured dialogue with Commissioners Gabriel and Breton

Against the backdrop of severe Covid-19-related hits to the cultural and creative, media and sports sectors and ongoing upheaval in the education sector, the CULT Committee held a structured dialogue with Commissioners Gabriel (Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth) and Breton (Internal Market) at their 4 May 2020 meeting. Over two hours, Members of the Committee quizzed and cross-examined the Commissioners on measures to support the sectors in the short term, to put in place robust recovery plans and to chart the way forward for EU policy-making as it learns the lessons from the crisis and adapts to a new normality.

Cultural and creative sector, media sector and audiovisual policy



The two Commissioners told MEPs that an EU support plan for the cultural and creative sector was underway as part of the wider EU recovery plan. Alongside more flexibility for current programmes and increased financial support through the Structural Funds, relaxed state aid rules and the prospective SURE scheme, Commissioner Gabriel pointed to two platforms – one for Member States to share best practice on how to use EU instruments effectively and one developed by the sector for the sectors – that would help the CCS to access and effectively target funding. She also pledged to look at increasing and adapting the Cultural and Creative Sectors Guarantee Facility under Creative Europe and to re-purpose the existing 'Music moves Europe' Preparatory Action to support the music sector.

Commissioner Breton highlighted the essential social value of cultural players and insisted on the need to support the most vulnerable in the sector through a grant-based 'repair plan' to be complemented by a longer-term loan-based investment plan. He highlighted the 5 million EUR scheme to support cinemas and the need to engage in a longer-term effort to support the use of digital technologies in content creation and distribution. On the media sector, Commissioner Breton underlined the vital role of media pluralism and diversity in a healthy democracy and emphasised the massive Covid-19-related impact on journalists (often freelancers) and on local and regional media. Beyond the immediate need for support, he pledged to look at longer-term measures to level the playing field vis-à-vis platforms both through the Digital Services Act and the Media and the Audiovisual Action Plan slated for later this year. He also made clear that he had reminded platforms of their obligations with respect to the spread of disinformation.



Commissioners Gabriel and Breton also pointed to the impact on cultural heritage as a central driver of tourism (40% of all EU tourism is cultural heritage-related) and therefore the need to build cultural heritage into any tourism recovery plan. Both also stressed the need to maintain the budget earmarked for Creative Europe in the next MFF.

While welcoming the Commissioners' clear recognition of the scale of the damage to the sectors, Members regretted that sector-specific measures on the table were primarily small-scale and timid. Where larger sums of money are available – e.g. through the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative – the small businesses and individual artists or journalists involved often struggle to find a way through the paperwork. The clear message to the Commission was to do more to support the sector now.

Commissioner Gabriel also made clear that the Commission is ready to extend the 2020 year for Galway and Rijeka (European Capitals of Culture), but is awaiting a response from the two cities.

On other policy questions, Members bemoaned the possible postponement of the AVMSD transposition deadline and the late adoption of the AVMSD guidelines and their late adoption and also questioned EU support for Euronews given its altered ownership structure.



Education, youth and sport

On Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, Commissioner Gabriel underscored the work done by the Commission with the National Agencies to support the 165,000 Erasmus+ participants and 5,000 ESC participants on a mobility exchange when confinement measures kicked in. She reported that some 60% of participants on long-term exchanges had cancelled their exchange, while for short-term exchanges that figure was 70%. Of those continuing most report that they have had access to online learning. The Commission is conducting weekly meetings with National Agencies and the Commissioner promised to keep the CULT Committee informed of developments. The Committee had previously called on the Commission to provide support and reassurance to programme participants and Members welcomed the increased attention given to that issue.

Commissioner Gabriel also spoke at length about the planned upgrade of the Digital Education Action Plan, scheduled for early July. Members repeatedly urged the Commission to learn the lessons from Covid-19 crisis, which has demonstrated considerable innovation in online learning, but also laid bare uneven online learning infrastructure and digital skills gaps among teachers and aggravated existing inequalities, for example in some minority communities. The Commissioner also pointed to a new initiative launched with the European Investment Fund – the Skills and Education Guarantee Pilot – which seeks to enhance access to finance for companies aiming to invest in skills and education.

On sport, Commissioner Gabriel stated that the 2020 European Week of Sport would be devoted to relaunching the sector post-Covid-19.

Shaping the new education, youth and culture programmes

The CULT Committee's and the Commission's focus over the past couple of months has been on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on education, culture, youth, media and sport. However, as the Commission works on a revised proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, one eye is still very firmly focused on the Erasmus+, Creative Europe and European Solidarity Corps programmes for the coming seven years. Members reminded the Commissioners of the need to deliver a proposal on programme governance to ensure that policy decisions over the coming seven years are taken by the co-legislators and not unilaterally by the Commission and also underscored the need to ensure proper funding for programmes over the coming seven-year period.

The next committee meeting: 28 May 2020 (tbc)

Useful links

- [CULT Committee website](#)
- [Meeting documents](#)
- [Calendar of meetings](#)
- [Policy Department Publications in the EP](#)
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